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ABSTRACT

Noting that there is growing interest in systematic, ethnographic studies of mass media and their primary audiences (families), this paper seeks to encourage additional ethnographic study of audience behavior by discussing some theoretical concerns that bear on the qualitative research enterprise. To do this, the paper first introduces a variety of perspectives that can be used to guide ethnographic research. It then discusses three of these perspectives--communication rules, the interpretive paradigm, and ethnomethodology--as theoretical points of departure for ethnographic research in mass communication. In addition, it discusses the ways in which communication rules are accounted for in normative, interpretive, and ethnomethodological perspectives. It presents the issues of generality and necessity in qualitative audience behavior and offers illustrations from qualitative research to demonstrate three modes of interpretation of audience behavior. (FL)

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ETHNOGRAPHIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION

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ETHNOGRAPHIES OF MASS COMMUNICATION

The role of human communication in social life has pervaded nearly every classic ethnography. However, research into the structures and processes of "mass" communication--few sources and many receivers engaged in unidirectional, mediated, symbolic activity--was born into a time when most communication and sociological researchers were automatically applying new quantitative methods impelled by probabilistic behavioral models in order to measure the "variables" they believed were at work. The mass media have been with us for a relatively short period of time. Mass communication research has an even shorter history. Today, for the first time, there is growing interest in systematic, ethnographic studies of the mass media and their primary audiences--families.

The purpose of this paper is to encourage further ethnographic study of audience behavior by discussing some theoretical concerns which bear on the qualitative research enterprise. This will be accomplished by introducing a variety of perspectives which can be used to guide ethnographic research. There are some recent developments in communications and sociology which are potentially very useful to the ethnographer of mass

communication. Three of these perspectives on social research (communication rules, the interpretive paradigm, and ethnomethodology) will be discussed as theoretical points of departure for ethnographic research in mass communication. The ways in which communication rules are accounted for in normative, interpretive and ethnomethodological perspectives will be discussed. The issues of generality and necessity in qualitative audience behavior will be presented and illustrations from qualitative research which has been conducted will be used to demonstrate three modes of interpretation of audience behavior.

No attempt is made in this paper to ultimately reconcile the differences in the perspectives which are discussed. Instead, an effort is made to draw relevant features from each perspective in order to compare theoretical vantage points from which audience behavior can be viewed using the ethnographic method of data collection. A common theme which pervades the three perspectives is a rejection of the covering law model as the most desirable of explanatory devices. From the perspectives which are discussed here, human behavior is regarded as fundamentally different from behaviors which characterize the natural sciences, a domain to which the covering law model is comfortably applied. Probabalistic, cause-and-effect models will perhaps remain useful as explanatory mechanisms for demographic accounts of human behavior, including quantifiable forms of audience behavior. However, naturalistic micro-social analyses of individual, family, and institutional audiences for the mass media reveal a range of behaviors which can not be easily categorized, aggregated, and condensed to meet the demands of parsimony and elegance in mathematical models. As Mehan and Wood have pointed out:

> The trouble with sociology is that its abstraction systematically distorts what common sense tells us was the beginning phenomenon of interest: the actual day-to-day social life of human beings. In the sociologist's tables of data, and even more in the theories made up about those tables, one cannot find a sense of the person's daily activities that produced the various phenomena those tables talk about. (1975, p. 48)

So, from the start, a fundamental concern of the ethnographic researcher is to preserve some sense of the primary data--the actions and events which comprise the doing of social life. This preoccupation seems less unfamiliar to communication researchers than to sociologists, perhaps, since the communications discipline finds its uniqueness in the study of messages, message producers and receivers, and contexts for transmission. These conceptual concerns are more reductionist by nature than are the studies of collectivities which comprise the mainstream of sociological inquiry.

A major departure from scientific laws explanations in communication theory is the "rules perspective" which has been adapted to communications in large measure by Cushman, Pearce and their associates (Cushman and Whiting, 1972; Pearce, 1973; Cushman and Pearce, 1977; Cushman, 1977). According to Cushman: "The rules perspective differs from the laws and systems perspectives in that it extends the legitimate range of scientific invention from causal to practical regularities and focuses attention on the manner in which such regularities manifest increasing levels of complexity" (Cushman, 1977, p. 38). The nature of "practical regularities" will be discussed in later sections of this paper. It is important at this point to note that the rules perspective does not require explanations based on temporal causality. The rules perspective form of explanation is based upon "practical necessity" (Cushman and Pearce, 1977).

Rules constitute a normative society. The "normative paradigm" has been criticized by sociologists who believe that rule-governed structures

and activities inadequately explain the nature of human behavior. A brief discussion of the normative paradigm follows. Communication rules will then be discussed in light of this perspective. Alternative views on these matters--interpretive sociology and ethnomethodology--will follow.

The Normative Paradigm

This view of social structure and process is one of tacit understanding and prescribed activity undertaken by the social actor. According to Mehan and Wood, "In the normative theory of action, actors are thought to enter situations, define them, recognize which rules are applicable, and act automatically. The normative theory says that actors make no judgment in order to 'know' what kind of situation they have entered" (Mehan and Wood, 1975, p. 75). The process of interaction, according to this conception, is not informed by its unravelling. The social actor deduces courses of action according to a set of self-held attitudes and imposed rules which characterize the occasion. Critics of the normative paradigm believe that the social actor is "overrationalized" in the model and, because meaning is thought to derive from the inflexible human use of formal logic, "elements of action [appear as] stable and finite 'things'" (Mehan and Wood, 1975, p. 75).

Wilson has explained the process of interaction according to the normative view:

> Interaction in a given situation, then, is explained by first identifying structures of role expectations and complexes of dispositions, and then showing that the relevant features of the observed interaction can be deduced from these expectations and dispositions along with the assumptions embodied in the model of the actor.... Common to both the concepts of disposition and expectation is the idea of a stable linkage between the situation of an actor and his action in that situation. In the case of an expectation, the linkage is imperative: the individual ought to behave in some specified way in a given situation.

> It will be convenient to refer to such a linkage, whether it is a disposition or an expectation, as a *rule*, which can be represented by the ordered pair (S,A,) where S is a specified situation and A is a particular action linked to the situation S by a disposition or expectation [italics mine] (Wilson, 1970, p. 699).

Wilson has distinguished the location of dispositions and expectations by suggesting that dispositions are rules "which have been internalized or learned by an actor while an expectation is a rule that has been institutionalized in a social system" (Wilson, 1971, p. 699).

These stable properties of human interaction provide substance for the social scientist to observe and describe activities with "literal descriptions." With this approach human activity is reported fundamentally irrespective of "the context or other features which the phenomena might also display" (Wilson, 1971, p. 703). Countless temporal, spatial and situational influences are ignored as relationships among social actors using communication are "assessed." In the normative view, according to Mehan and Wood, "Social structures are treated as objective and constraining social facts. At the empirical level, sociology treats these structures as variables. Conventional sociological studies seek the relationships among these variables" (Mehan and Wood, 1975, p. 14). Rules, which themselves are identified as variables, hold the human components of the structures together.

The Rules Perspective in Communication

Communication rules is a theoretical perspective on the nature of human communication. The rules perspective has much in common with the normative paradigm in that proponents of this view of human interaction believe that rules are applied under particular logical and empirical conditions. Rules guide human interaction and are logically deduced by social

actors. Further, constellations of rules can be seen to form networks or "standardized usages" (Cappella, 1972; Cushman and Pearce, 1977).

Communication rules are said to attain "order and regularity in the communication process. They do this by governing and guiding the communicative transaction" (Cushman and Whiting, 1972, pp. 228-9). Communication rules take the form of a practical syllogism embedded in an "underlying normative order" which gives meaning to the transaction (Cushman & Pearce, 1977, p. 349): An individual or group intends to bring about C; A considers that in order to bring about C he must do B; and therefore A sets himself to do B (Von Wright, 1963). Whether or not an individual determines to attempt to bring about C by doing B depends upon the *normative force* experienced by the social actor. When individuals act in concert--when they both view and act upon B as the means to achieve C--they have participated in a "managed" or "coordinated" interaction.

The social actor is viewed as having a *choice* in the selection of behavior. However, he or she is responsive to the weight of normative force as it is manifest in the dispositions held by the individual as he or she partakes in an interactive *episode*. According to Cushman and Pearce:

> Episodes consist of communicators' interpretations of the actual sequences of messages they jointly produce. These episodes are aimed at facilitating coordination in regard to some task and carry differential practical force depending upon their contribution to the coordination process. Such episodic sequences of communication behavior are the basis for theories of communication in a rules context (Cushman and Pearce, 1977, p. 349).

This coordinating process has also been termed the "regulation of consensus" and the activity is not limited to interpersonal exchanges. Cushman (1977) has argued that these rule-governed activities apply to group, organizational, and mass communicative levels of interaction as well (Cushman, 1977), although his conception of mass communication

follows the narrow sociological tradition of collective behavior rather than the more modern micro-social "uses and gratifications" perspective.

Dyads, families, social organizations, and cultures may coordinate their activities by means of rules which are understood only by them. Therefore, "interpersonal level of meaning is rule-governed but the rule may be understood or apply only within a particular dyad. Families [also] develop special consensual meanings for symbols" (Cushman and Whiting, 1972, p. 221).

Rules are "sets of common expectations about the appropriate responses to particular symbols in particular contexts" (Cushman and Whiting, 1972, p. 225). The use of rules by social units creates practical regularities in their routines. These behaviors are verbal and non-verbal and are available for observation to the social researcher. Patterned regularities of rule use give the communication researcher a substantive mode for analysis and explanation of human interaction. Nonetheless, rules are varied and complex rather than unified (Toulmin, 1974). Further, ". . . complex patterns of interpersonal communication require the concept of hierarchically-ordered contracts, consisting of a few fundamental rules, several sets of rules governing interaction in specific situations, and switching cues used to move from one subset to another" (Pearce, 1973, p. 160).

To summarize, the rules perspective is founded on the ideas of normative force and practical necessity. The individual chooses to join with other social actors in order to coordinate symbolic exchanges thereby achieving some mutually-desired goal. The structure of rule-directed communications takes the form of the practical syllogism which may apply to dyads, groups, organizations or larger collectivities. Rules may be general in nature of idiosyncratic--understood only by

the members of particular communication systems. Rule use generates observable practical regularities which social researchers can study in order to systematically explain and predict human communicative activity. These are not simple transactions:

> From a rules perspective, the orderly development of human communication theory would proceed by explicating the powerful mechanisms which give rise to rule behaviors and determining the logical and empirical conditions under which each type of rule regularity might be expected. Additional theories would then be developed at each level of rule behavior to account for the regularities involved. These theories would then be employed as warrants for developing expectations about observable behavior (Cushman, 1977, p. 38).

The Interpretive Paradigm

The nature of social reality is not so ordered and fixed as the rules perspective implies, according to researchers who view behavior as an interpretive process. Rules, which have been described as the forceful linkages of normative society, cannot be conceptualized as static or formal devices. Essentially, the interpretive perspective characterizes social interaction as ongoing circumstances wherein social actors constantly engage in reflexive, role-taking behavior. Each interactant takes the role of the other into consideration as he attempts to understand the communication event. Each interactant is perpetually informed by the intersection of meaning which derives from an examination of self and a simultaneous approximation of meaning as it is believed to be experienced from the point of view of the other. In order to do this, a continual process of interpretation of the other's perspective is conducted by each interactant. According to Wilson (1971):

> . . . one actor perceives the behavior of another as a meaningful action expressing some purpose or sentiment embodied in a role. On the basis of this perception of what the other is up to, the actor then devises his own course of action. (p. 700)

An interactant does not simply "perform" an expected role during interpersonal exchanges. He is sensitive to other interactants ongoing definitions of situations. His contribution to the scene is fashioned on the basis of the "imputed other role. The other is not the occupant of a status for which there is a neat set of rules--a culture or set of norms--but a person who must act in the perspective supplied in part by his relationship to those whose actions reflect roles he must identify" (Turner, 1962, p. 23).

The interpretive perspective poses that interaction be considered in the richness and detail of the context in which it is rendered. The context must be understood in terms of the interactants' social realities, not some foreign imagery proposed by a researcher who is unfamiliar with the nuances of the scene as they are perceived and acted upon by the social members. Wilson has described some of the limitations of the scientist's external "objective" criteria in describing and understanding human activity:

> ". . . the description of interaction cannot be treated as literal . . . in order to establish the meaning of a description of an action, the observer must rely, not only on a body of common-sense knowledge shared by his colleagues, but rather also on his grasp of the common-sense understandings shared by the participants in the interaction itself. Consequently, in order to communicate to his colleagues, the observer must evoke in them the context for any given descriptive statement so that they will see it in the same light he does" (Wilson, 1970, p. 705).

Just as interactants engage in continual documentary interpretations of each other's actions in order to communicate effectively,

so too must the social researcher. This task may be extremely difficult, however, since the researcher may be quite unfamiliar with even the basic assumptions embedded in the particular social enclaves which are chosen for study.

The interpretive view also maintains that understanding the nature of a communicative episode is continually open to redefinition.

> Each action in the course of interaction . . . is an indexical particular that is understood by the participants in terms of the place of the action in the context of what has gone before and what they see as the future course of the interaction . . . the meanings of situations and actions are interpretations formulated on particular occasions by by participants in the interaction and are subject reformulation on subsequent occasions" (Wilson, 1970, p. 701).

The Ethnomethodological Perspective

Although many ethnomethodologists would not like to be cast as part of an enterprise which is a subset of *anything* else, it is convenient to discuss some general tenets of ethomethodology in light of the interpretive paradigm in sociology. There is common ground between the two perspectives.

Ethnomethods are rudimentary behaviors in which social actors engage in order to construct social reality in a manner which makes "sense" to themselves and others in the environment. Ethnomethods are social-structuring activities. They are the "practices that structure everyday life" (Mehan and Wood, 1976, p. 17). The ethnomethodologist is interested in the ways in which social actors *do* various activities, not the outcomes of those activities. This crucial distinction has been made nicely by Zimmerman in his reply to Lewis A. Coser, the former president of the American Sociological Association, who had criticized ethnomethodology:

> Coser simply fails to grasp the distinction between the *content* of social interaction as it is known to the participants or to the conventional sociological observer, on the one hand, and, on the other, the *form* of social interaction that can be seen most clearly only when one suspends concern for *what* people are doing and seeks to describe *how* they are doing it" (Zimmerman, 1976, p. 9).

Any social activity is substance for analysis by the ethnomethodologist (*doing* walking, *doing* talking, *doing* television viewing) and each of these activities can be conceived to have a *grammar* in much the same sense that language does (Churchill, 1971). Examination of these processes, according to ethnomethodologists, can lead to an understanding of the "fundamental bases of social order" (Zimmerman, 1978, p. 12). Social actors continually "accomplish" social life by their participation in these primary activities. According to Zimmerman, "The apparent strangeness of this perspective is due to the fact that it introduces a strange and hitherto unexplored domain of inquiry--the commonplace world (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970, p. 55).

Observing the accomplishment of mundane social tasks allows the ethnomethodologist to study the "natural language" of human behavior. Natural language refers to the

> systematics of producing utterances, expressions, gestures, and so forth which (a) achieve a particular meaning or delineated range of alternative meanings in some local environments; (b) contribute to, establish, negotiate or expose a 'definition' or definitions of the situation; or (c) express and warrant assertions or statements concerning one's or the other's 'state of mind,' 'motive,' 'feeling,' 'what's right and wrong with this world' and so on. These are seen as situated accomplishments of the use of 'natural language' (Zimmerman, 1978, p. 11).

The ethnomethodological approach has sometimes been characterized by its doubters as psychological, psychoanalytic, or radically subjectivist. This is a major criticism of the method which its practitioners

vigorously deny. Mehan and Wood, for instance, claim that the ". . . constitutive practice does not reduce the problem of social order to psychology. The structurings are not psychological variables" (Mehan and Wood, 1976, p. 17). Ethnomethodologists believe that they study concrete, empirical, social behavior. Communication theorists might add that the phenomena which ethnomethodologists focus upon often are communication variables. Since communication theory is based upon the study of messages, message senders and receivers, and message-producing contexts, there is considerable overlap between the substantive preoccupations of communication theorists and ethnomethodologists. Both are concerned with symbolic human interaction.

Social structuring activities which involve conversations provide bulk amounts of *observable* data which are extremely useful to many ethnomethodologists. Transcripts of conversations are "intersubjectively available record(s) of the actual exchange of utterances" (Zimmerman, 1976, p. 10). These documents are preferred by some analysts of interaction to subjective accounts of practice or meaning rendered by the individuals and are analyzed in microscopic detail in order to find clues to the basic structures of social interaction. Regularities in verbal communication, such as the linguistic and paralinguistic cues which signal particular behaviors in conversational turn-taking, for instance, are of special interest to the ethnomethodologist.

The structuring activities described by ethnomethodologists "exist in empirical multitude. These practices are scene-specific; different scenes are assembled by different practices" (Mehan and Wood, 1976, p. 16). Nonetheless, the goal of the ethnomethodologist is to "seek the properties that all the structuring practices have in common" (Mehan and Wood, 1976,

p. 16). In sum, ethnomethodologists are concerned with the essential constitutive practices which social actors employ to create their social realities whether or not these activities are accomplished intentionally or consciously. In general, these researchers do not desire to assemble typologies of practices or lists of the outcomes of these practices. Knowledge of members' practices is useful for illustration of the underlying social order. Further, the researcher is a "participant," not a "mere observer," of social scenes (Mehan and Wood, 1976, p. 10).

The ethnomethodological perspective does not deny the use of rules by social actors. Rather, rule use is thought to be a contextually-defined, managed phenomenon incessantly created by the interactants. Every social actor lives with certain expectations about the way in which social life is intersubjectively conducted. The assumptive world of rule use comprises the individual's set of "background expectancies" (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 55-6). But rules are perpetually interpreted by the social actor in light of a set of circumstances. In order to be a competent rule user, the individual must be able to make commonsense adaptations to situations. The competent rule user is able to apply rules situationally. Competent rule use implies the systematic accommodation of practicality.

An example from a study conducted by Bittner (1967) on police work conducted on skid row illustrates the point being made. Police had been summoned to a bar where a woman was screaming because a man had insulted her. According to the "rule" of society, the police should have removed the man who inappropriately insulted the female customer. But, because the action would have stirred a strong protest from the other skid row residents who were present, the complaining woman was

removed from the bar instead. By treating the symptom as the cause of the disturbance in this situation, the police were acting as competent rule users. The effect was that the disturbance was eliminated. Had the police not acted in this way, they would have been "judgmental dopes" (Garfinkel, 1967).

Features of situations determine appropriate rule use. A grasp of these features followed by the correct response to them allows an individual to conduct himself as a competent rule user. Social actors, rules, and the practical context constitute the situation. This is an integrated, interlocking unit of influences in which no single element "can be abstracted out and treated as either the cause or effect" (Mehan and Wood, 1975, pp. 75-6).

The Issues of Necessity and Generality in Theory Building

Rules theorists believe that communication rules are useful to social actors as practical inventions. The social actor chooses to engage in particular communications in order to accomplish certain goals. Interactants abide by a set of consensually-understood rules in order to achieve those goals. The necessity in rules theory, therefore, is a *practical* syllogism (A intends to bring about C. A knows that if he is to get C, under specified conditions, he must undertake communication episode B. A sets himself to do B.) The *weight* of practical necessity is the best explanation for the predictability of rule use. Thus, necessity, as it is understood in the rules perspective, is found by locating interpersonal tasks which have a high degree of normative and practical weight (Cushman and Pearce, 1977). Examination of episodes in which rules are present allows the researcher to find "general and specific patterns which provide the basis for a scientific

explanation and prediction of human behavior, keeping in mind that the scientific explanations will appeal less to law-like regularities and more to rule-governed choices" (Cushman and Whiting, 1972, p. 227). Still, rules are discovered in observation of human interaction by noting the "regularity of their occurrence" (Fisher, 1978, p. 76).

The researcher also wants to know what degree of generality communication rules hold. The number of contexts in which the rule is applicable has been termed the "range" of the rule (Cushman and Whiting, 1972, p. 233). Further, "The degree of generality is restricted by the number and type of initial conditions which must be met for the relationships in the [rules] theory to hold" (Cushman and Pearce, 1977, p. 345).

The individual exercises a choice whether or not to abide by the rule. According to Fisher, "Choosing not to follow a rule does not invalidate the existence of the rule but serves only to assess the strength of the rule as an explanatory device" (Fisher, 1978, p. 76). The argument for generality of communications rules is different from the modes of generality which characterize the laws perspective and does not attain the "universal" or "deterministic" power of explanation that laws-based theories achieve. This should not be viewed as a fault of the rules perspective. The rules perspective has been introduced as a more powerful form of explanation of social interaction than laws or systems explanations. For many years, behavioral scientists attempted to apply the paradigms and methods of the natural sciences to the study of human behavior. The results, in terms of variance explained about important questions, has been discouraging.

While some rules of interaction seem to be socially and culturally

understood and practiced by a wide range of rule users, other more intricate forms of rule-based interactions take place in dyads, families, and other social units who share unique methods of symbolic interaction. The diverse and idiosyncratic use of rules by social actors inhibits external validation of any particular rule. Nonetheless, classes or categories of rule-based behavior can be formed and may provide the basis for meaningful generalization. The danger of this approach is that the construction of category schemes, which necessarily are abstractions of the real events, may distort the fundamental nature of the rules which are being described.

The interpretive paradigm is not based on deduction. Therefore, the question of causal or logical necessity does not apply to this perspective. According to Wilson "Sociological explanations of patterns of interaction are inherently interpretive rather than deductive, and thus they are subject to cannons of objectivity and competence quite different, though no less demanding, from those employed in the sciences based on literal description." Action is interpreted in "terms of the purposes and situations of the actors [and this] is a meaningful and significant form of explanation" (Wilson, 1970, p. 706).

Ethnomethodologists have made it clear that particular features of interaction, or categories which describe these features, are not their principle domains of study. Nor is any attempt made by them to generalize these features from one setting to another. Instead the *methods* or practices of social interaction "are assumed to display invariant properties across settings whose substantive features they make observable. It is to the discovery of these practices and their invariant properties that inquiry is to be addressed. Thus, instead of

an ethnography which inventories a setting's distinctive, substantive features, the research vehicle envisioned here is a methodography. . . which searches for practices through which those substantive features are made observable" (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1970, p. 47). Since the actual features of a setting are accomplished in special ways by the social actors who inhabit the setting, it is not possible to generalize the features of the setting. Features of social interaction have meaning only in terms of the contexts in which they occur: ". . . to extract an event such as a member's statement from the locally organized context in which it occurs, without knowledge of the principles of that organization, runs the risk of fundamentally distorting the information carefully garnered through coding procedures or other research tools" (Zimmerman, 1978, p. 11).

The use of communicative rules in social situations, according to ethnomethodologists, is also situation-specific and reflexive:

> Ethnomethodology has rejected formal logic as a model of action. The concept of rule has been central to all previous social theories. Therefore, a body of work was begun to construct an alternative description of rule use. The work has commonly employed the ethnographic method. It has lead to the general claim that rule use is neither automatic nor consistent. Whenever a rule is applied, it must be applied within a specific social situation. Relevant rules do not merely emerge once a social situation is determined. Actors, rules, and situations ceaselessly inform one another (Mehan and Wood, 1976, p. 75).

With the idea that features of a setting, including rules, cannot be adequately generalized, and that rigorous examinations of communicative contexts must take place in order to understand the event as it is intersubjectively interpreted by the interactants, we shall now turn to methodological approaches to the study of human interaction

which are characteristic of the perspectives discussed herein.

Approaches to Measurement

Many of the most interesting aspects of human communication seem to willfully resist measurement. In the opinion of the author, however, the three perspectives discussed in this paper--communication rules, interpretive sociology, and ethnomethodology, can nonetheless benefit greatly in their explanatory power from ethnographic data. These data are retrieved by intensive, careful scrutiny of social units over time. They include detailed, first-hand observations of social life, insights provided by informants, and information gathered by in depth interviewing of the social actors themselves.

Cushman and his associates have not discussed measurement techniques in their presentation of the communication rules perspective. Their discussions have relied upon hypothetical examples and deductive logic applied to them. They have not presented primary data collected by field methods or any other method. Despite the artificial nature of the examples, the discussions of the communication rules provided by Cushman relies upon illustrations of interactional episodes. There is no richer source of interactional episodes than the natural environment. Surely, systematic participant-observational research could provide a wealth of data for the further development of communication rules theory.

Ethnographic data is also useful, if not essential, to the interpretive sociologist who must "be much more explicit and self-conscious than is customary in making available to his audience the context and ground for his interpretations" (Wilson, 1970, p. 706). Ethnography is a natural data-collection technique for this purpose since the method, when effectively conducted, requires that the researcher demonstrate

the richness and detail of the context in which communication takes place. Further, the investigator must be alert to relationships between the particular behaviors which are observed and the underlying contexts in which the behavior occurs. The observer also takes into account the endless possibility that later events may modify the meaning of what is noted at any time during the data collection process. As Wilson has found, "In observational studies of interaction, it is not uncommon for the observer to understand what the events recorded in his notes really consist of only in light of subsequent events and often only after he has left the field altogether" (Wilson, 1970, p. 704). No matter what research method is employed, the interpretive sociologist realizes that all of human interaction is informed by the documentary method of interpretation--including the observer's relationship with the observed. The interpretive sociologist takes the role of the social actor in an effort to understand his subject's world from his viewpoint. Ethnography is well suited to this objective.

Ethnomethodologists have not been limited to any one particular method for conducting research. Laboratory studies, naturalistic experiments, historical records, surveys, field ethnographies, and film and videotape recordings have all been used (Mehan and Wood, p. 17). The fundamental concern of these researchers is the identification of basic social processes which expose the nature of how people engage in the *doing* of social life.

Ethnomethodologists do not make judgments about the correctness of the ways in which people construct social scenes. For instance, the written administrative records of various organizations have been examined by ethnomethodologists (Zimmerman, 1966, 1970; Garfinkel, 1967,

186-207). The results of these studies have not commented upon the untidy record-keeping practices of organizations as a *problem*, but rather as a *phenomenon* whereby the records were kept common-sensically in a way not readily explainable to the traditional social scientist who would examine them without knowledge of their context. *Theoretical interests* of social scientists do not match the *practical activities* of the members of the social unit, according to this perspective. For the ethnomethodologist, the record keeping itself is the phenomenon. The ethnomethodologist studies the orderly practicalities of rule use, an approach which is facilitated by ethnography.

Any researcher who has attempted to use the participant-observation method has probably come to a variety of conclusions about it, some of which are extremely encouraging, others of which are not so encouraging. In this work, the researcher becomes inundated by findings. In an important way this is an exciting discovery because it reaffirms the idea that context—the sensuous environment in which human communication is conducted--must be understood and communicated to the reader if any sense of the true event is to be imparted. With this realization comes the responsibility of communicating the context with validity. The flood of data must be sorted out, both in the process of collecting the information and later reporting it. Some ethnographers have reported chronologically and in great detail the nature of social processes as they unfold. Others have found it useful to construct category schemes and typologies and to ignore much of the detail.

Regardless of approach, the ethnographer of communication is confronted with a rather common set of methodological obstacles. These are no less important to the ethnographer than are the research design

and statistical decisions made by the quantitative researcher. At least four basic considerations must be taken into account by the ethnographer of communication: (a) sampling, (b) observational techniques, (c) stages of data collection, (d) organization and presentation of data (Lull, 1979). There are many volumes written about general approaches to participant observation research (e.g., Bruyn, 1966; Lofland, 1971; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975).

Qualitative Analysis of Audience Behavior

The three perspectives discussed in previous sections of this paper have some important differences, particularly their divergences on inductive and deductive forms of explanation. They are held together, however, by the idea that probabilistic, covering law models of social behavior are not adequate for description and explanation of human communication as it is conducted in natural environments.

Through the use of pertinent examples, an attempt will now be made to demonstrate the facility of the three perspectives previously discussed as means for demonstrating the value of ethnographic findings. These illustrations are not meant to be exhaustive of the kinds of data which have been gathered ethnographically. Rather, specific examples will be used to demonstrate ways in which ethnographic data can provide meaningful insights into some of the social roles played by the mass media.

Importantly, naturalistic investigations of media audience behavior have immediately revealed that *situational characteristics determine the social uses of television.* This claim will be discussed in light of the major perspectives which have been presented in this paper. An

example from ethnographic research will be posed in order to provide a substantive illustration fitting for comparative analysis:

A farm woman, who 15 years previously resigned her pre-med scholarship to a major Midwestern university, married her high school boyfriend and attended vocational school in order to become a medical secretary. Her first child was born one year following her marriage, causing her to quit a job at a doctor's office which she had held only briefly.

The *only* television programs watched by this woman during the research period were shows which featured settings and themes directly related to the medical profession *(Marcus Welby, M.D., Medical Center, Medical Story)*. When these programs were aired she engaged in a continual, intense commentary about the nature of the stories, particularly as those aspects related to medical considerations. She remarked about the appropriateness of operating room procedures. She evaluated the work of subordinates and always referred to the doctors by their formal titles. She praised medical work well done and found fault with mistakes made by the staff. The Caesarean section of quintuplets during one melodrama caused her to remark instructively about the importance of quickly trimming "all five cords."

During an interview probe following a week-long observation period, the woman said:

> I've always been interested in anything medical, in anything to do with the medical field. So, that's what I like . . . I usually find that their [medical] information is pretty accurate for their diagnosis of disease and so forth . . . so, I enjoy it because I worked around a lot of that and it just kinda' keeps me in the business, I guess.

Her husband frequently reminded her of the times when her favorite programs were to be presented and encouraged her to watch. He even changed the television channel from *Monday Night Football* in order to insure

that she watched a medical program which was presented by a competing network at the same time.

Now, what is of interest here? Several person-media considerations come into play. We have the relationship of the woman, Priscilla, with programs which appear on television. We know that she finds satisfaction in watching medical shows as her verbalizing during the shows and her discussion of the attraction of staying "in the business" testifies. This is particularly true since she says she "hates" television and "hardly ever" watches it.

Her husband, Bob, watches a lot of television. He loves the medium, especially action adventure shows and football games ("Now, there's a sport I was really good at. But our high school didn't have no money and they couldn't field a team. I wished that I could've played more football than I did.").

What happens when a program conflict arises as it did during the episode described above? In this case, Bob suggested that the channel be changed away from the football game and to the medical program. How can this interaction be analyzed?

A communication rules theorist might argue from the deductive logic of the practical syllogisms: (A desires to achieve C; in order for A to achieve C, he must do B; A sets himself to do B.) Some idea of the *goal* of Bob's communication is needed in order to give meaning to a communication rules interpretation. How does one learn of the goals of social actors? Why not ask them?

Let's say that Bob is asked why he changed the channel to the medical program during the middle of a football game. To this question,

he replies: "She (referring to his wife) doesn't like football. She thinks it's too violent. I've got to keep her happy." This was true of her attitude, but was this the reason that he changed the channel? There is much more to this seemingly simple episode than first appears.[1] Nonetheless, based on the information presented, the practical syllogism could be modeled thusly: Bob (A) desired to maintain marital harmony (C) with his wife; in order to do so, he determined that "giving in" on certain television viewing (B) was a means to accomplish his goal; he (A) changed the channel (B). Bob engaged in a particular behavior in order to achieve a desired objective. The fundamental criteria of the practical syllogism have been met and the result is logically, and not incorrectly, deduced.

But the more intriguing questions have not been answered. First, what were the *reasons* for changing the channel at the time the action was taken? Second, what were the more far-reaching implications of this action? Naked communication rules theory seems unable to sufficiently explain the more complex levels of meaning which inhere in this, and other, communication transactions. The need for communication rules theorists to focus on the properties of "coordinative" rule use, for instance, might provide a more powerful form of explanation than is now available. Cushman and Whiting (1972) and Pearce et al. (1979) have proposed that the coorientation model may provide an additional interactional dimension to the rules perspective.

The interpretive sociologist might examine the scene in terms of the meanings generated by each social actor as they interact in a particular viewing context and within an overall social environment. The

ethnographic method provides much information for interpretation. Recalling that Priscilla's career was cut short by her marriage and child-raising, the researcher might suggest that the husband appeared to use television as a fantasy stimulant for his wife. Although his wife knew full well what times her favorites were televised, he reminded her of these and encouraged her to watch. In this way, she could partake in her lost profession. His encouragement of her participation in the dream world which their marriage and child-raising denied her may also have helped him dismiss whatever guilt he may harbor for having been, in part, responsible for curtailing her vocational opportunities.

Now, we have plausible answers to the two questions which were left unanswered by the analysis which might have been conducted by a rules theorist. To answer the first question: The *real reasons* for changing the channel as they were important to the moment were to allow Priscilla to participate vicariously in a professional/vocational experience. The second question, regarding the far-reaching implications of the act, reveal that by allowing her to do so he is creating an environment at home in which his wife has repeated opportunities to contact her desired professional/vocational world, thereby keeping her happy with him and the children.

This form of analysis has placed crucial demands on the researcher. First, the researcher has attempted to grasp the meaning of the media-related interaction in terms of interpersonal implications which extend beyond the isolated viewing experience. In order to build a plausible explanation for this behavior, the researcher has examined an ethnographic data base--biographical histories of each interactant, the family history, lengthy interviews in which each person told of their

personal interests, ambitions, and feelings. He has received information about each family member from every other family member. When their reports converged with observations there appeared to be valid findings.

The researcher could be accused of speculating about all these connections. But, the analysis which was provided rests fundamentally upon qualitative data which was actually provided in the course of a seven-day study of the family. The meaning of the event has been placed within the context of the marriage. Further, both the husband and wife confirmed that the explanation given in the preceding paragraphs is a likely explanation for what was observed. Of course, the interpretive researcher does not need to rely on the confirmation of observations by his subjects. There are many latent, unformulated activities in which individuals partake that may not be consciously known to them, but become observable to the researcher when a synthesis of perspectives is made by examining and integrating the roles of each interactant.

Both of the above perspectives on this data have something to say about communication "outcomes." Analyses of communication rules which apply to audience behavior and interpretations of the actions of social actors in particular viewing contexts are informative to the mass communcation researcher. The ethnomethodologist, on the other hand, does not care that these behaviors took place in a television viewing context. The ethnomethodologist wants to know what the underlying processes of interaction are and how those activities reveal something about the "fundamental bases of social order." Therefore, purely ethnomethodological studies are not particularly informative for students of mass communications, *per se*. These data may be useful to ethnomethodologists as evidence from which turn-taking or role-switching behavior might be found. He

might also be interested in the set of "background expectancies" which accompany viewing and *how* the individual reconstructs social reality when these assumptions are shattered. The ethnomethodologist wants to learn of the transituational characteristics of human interaction. The act of social media consumption for its own sake is irrelevant.

Episodes such as the one described in the previous few paragraphs are comprised of several elements. An interpretive understanding of the phenomenon required sustained and systematic observations of an interaction that accompanied television viewing; knowledge of the history of the individuals and the family; and personal information gained through in-depth interviewing. Further, the culmination of data was assembled over a period of time. The researcher would not have been able to learn of these indicators by conducting a doorstep interview or setting up a simulated television viewing situation in a communications laboratory. The ethnographic method seems to be especially well-suited to probing the "effects" of television, or, in uses and gratifications terms, the "uses" of media made by media consumers in order to gratify their personal and interpersonal needs.

Not all audience behavior is so complex as the example which was given. For instance, one set of observed viewing "rules" is limited to what might be called the "rhythm of viewing," a concept not unlike "rhythms of dialogue," a way by which conversational flow can be described and predicted (Jaffe and Feldstein, 1970). Television's predictable commercial breaks help establish routinized patterns of talk in front of the television set. We have found, for instance, that viewers who leave the room during a program can expect to receive a briefing on what was missed when they return that will not start until

the next commercial break begins and will last no more than a few seconds into the next program segment. The rule of non-interruption is implicit in the viewing experience. Other viewing rules involving program switching, argument facilitation, conversational entrance, demonstration of role competency, and dominance-submission patterns have been noted by means of ethnographic research on audience behavior (Lull, 1978).

Concluding Note

Hopefully, more social researchers will employ the ethnographic method in order to conduct studies of media audience behavior, particularly as it occurs in the context of family life at home. One purpose of this writing was to discuss some of the basic assumptions which characterize communication rules theory and the normative paradigm, the interpretive paradigm, and ethnomethodology. Conceptual features of these constructs were examined in relation to their relevance for studies of the social activities of audience members. In future research, the distinctions made in this paper about these various approaches should be useful while evaluating observational evidence about audience behavior.

To summarize, ethnomethodology seems least well suited to the study of audience behavior since the issues which its proponents are concerned with do not directly inform the person who is interested in mass communication theory. Audience research can serve as a vehicle for the ethnomethodologist to examine more fundamental behavior. The contribution made by ethnomethodologists to the study of audience behavior, from my view, is that they have called upon social researchers to analyze the microscopic activities of social life. By doing so, they have called attention to the possibilities of theory building which

inhere in intensive case studies of fundamental human activity. When this recommendation is followed by the mass communication researcher, the focus turns to behavioral episodes such as verbal communication which takes place during television viewing. In order to study this phenomenon, and others like it, the researcher is required to spend time observing naturally-occurring behaviors as they unfold in their natural environments.

Communication rules, though shown to be part of the criticized normative conception of social explanation, has been proposed as an alternative, productive perspective for the study of audience behavior. Rules theory is responsive to the practicalities of social life and does not function in the probabilistic, cause-and-effect environment envisioned by proponents of scientific laws explanations. Despite the attraction of rules as an alternative descriptive form of human communication, this perspective does not adequately account for some of the more intricate issues which are embedded in social activity. Rules theorists are now attempting to synthesize the principles of their theory with the coorientation model of human behavior in order to generate a model of communication that is more truly interactive. The prospect of this successful integration is an exciting one.

Contributions made by the interpretive view in sociology are particularly helpful to and supportive of the ethnographer of mass communication. As has been demonstrated in this paper, the social researcher can only understand the complex nature of social processes by doing everything possible in order to see the world as his or her subjects' see it. This calls for a methodological approach whereby the researcher attempts to uncover the details of social life and the subtle textures

of meaning which they hold. In reporting, the researcher must recreate the context of human activity. Since social interaction is an interpretive process, literal description imposed by deductive explanation is not warranted.

Some researchers will choose not to adhere to principles implicit in the rules or interpretive conceptions and will continue to conduct quantitative studies of audience behavior which rely on the forms of explanation consistent with scientific laws. Others, such as Anderson and his associates (Anderson et al., 1979) have combined observational analyses with statistical measures of independent and dependent variables. Perhaps a convergence of methodological approaches will someday produce significantly more insights about audience behavior than we have today. The time has certainly arrived for ethnographers of mass communication to make a major contribution.

Footnotes

[1]It is important to note here that no communication theorists, rules or otherwise, would have known enough even to ask about this episode unless they had witnessed it by means of some form of participant observational research.

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